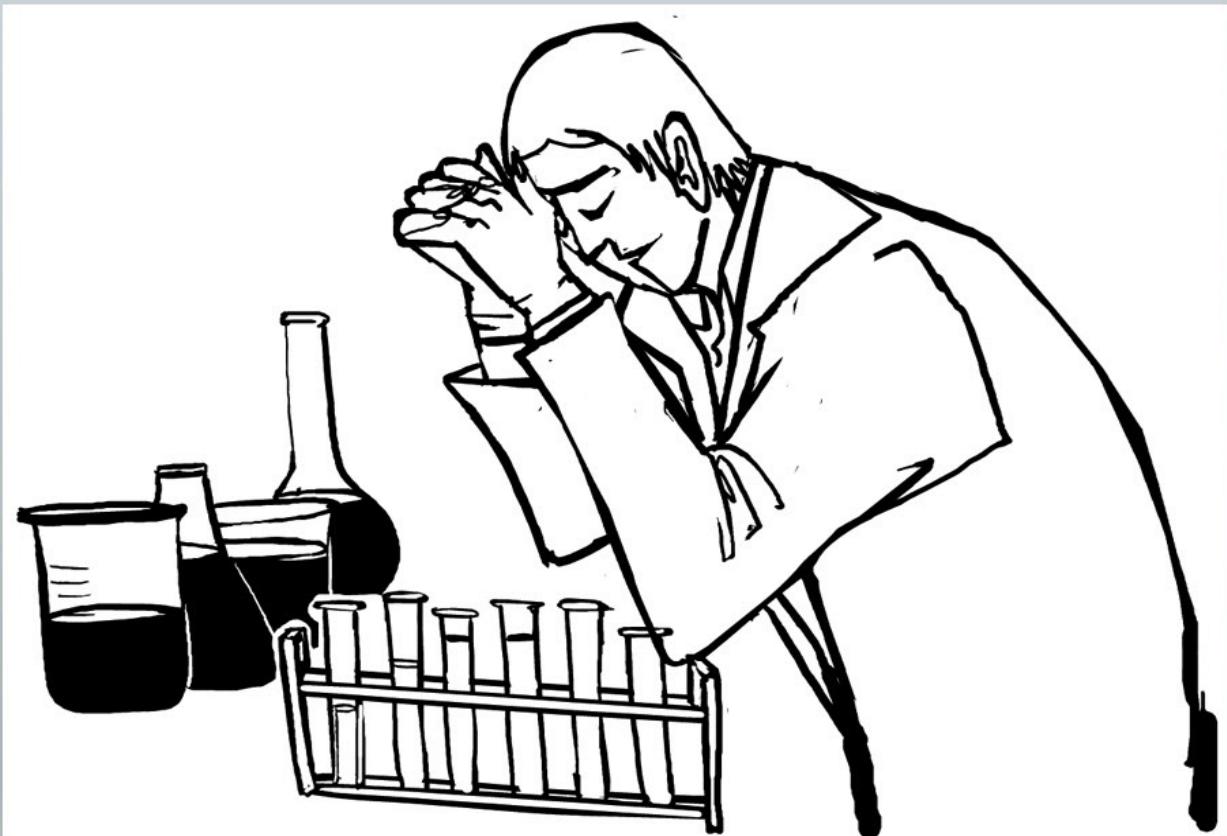


Manual labor and mental activity



Lev Tolstoy

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A letter to Romain Rolland, also known as: Letter to the Frenchman

Dear brother!

I received your first letter. It touched my heart. I read it with tears in my eyes. I intended to respond to it but had no time, especially that — not to mention the difficulty for me to write in French — I would have to answer your questions in great details, because most of them are based on misunderstanding.

You are asking: 'Why manual labor is one of the essential conditions for true happiness? Is it necessary to voluntarily deprive ourselves of mental activity, sciences and arts, which seem to you incompatible with manual labor?'

I've already answered these questions as much as I could in the book entitled: "So what are we to do?" which, as I have heard, has been translated into French.

*I have never considered manual labor a stand-alone principle
but always looked at it the most simple and natural
application of moral principle, - such application, which before
anything else comes to the mind of every sincere person.*

Manual labor in our corrupt society (the society of the so-called educated people) is mandatory for us at least because the chief fault of this society was and still is in relieving ourselves from labor and in exploiting, without any reciprocity, of the work of poor, ignorant, unfortunate classes, being our slaves just like the slaves of ancient world were.

The first thing people belonging to the idle society and professing Christian, philosophical, or humanitarian principles must do to proof their sincerity is to try, as much as they can, to exit this contradiction.

The most simple and handy at all times solution, before anything else, is manual labor directed toward addressing personal needs. I will never believe the sincerity of Christian, philosophical, humanitarian beliefs of a person who makes his servant take out his feces.

The simplest and shortest ethical rule is to involve others as little as possible in serving yourself, and for yourself to serve others as much as possible, - to demand from others as least as possible, and to give others as much as possible.

This rule, which gives our existence sensible meaning and derived happiness, resolves other dilemmas, including the standing before you: 'What is left for our mental activity, sciences and arts?' Based on this rule, I can only be happy and satisfied when I have a firm conviction that my work is useful to others. (The satisfaction of those for whom I act I consider already a surplus, an additional happiness, which I don't account for and which cannot influence the choice of my actions for me.)

Having a firm confidence that what I do is not something useless and is not evil but is good for others is therefore the essential condition for my happiness. This is what encourages a righteous and sincere person to prefer manual labor to scientific and artistic work.

A book that I write requires labor of printers, a symphony that I compose requires musicians, the experiments I set require the work of those who produce our laboratory instruments, a picture I draw requires those who produce paint and canvas, — all these things can be useful to people, but they may happen, which happens most often, to become completely useless and even harmful. And so, while I'm absorbed into doing all these things, the usefulness of which is highly questionable and for which I must compel others to work, I am also surrounded from all sides by a multitude of chores that are needed to be done, which, if I do them, will undoubtedly help others and for which I do not need to draw anyone else's assistance: to bring something heavy to help a tired; to process the field whose owner became ill; to bandage a wound. But let's not talk about those countless errands that surround us, for which you do not want to draw others' help and which would give an immediate relief to those for whose benefit you do them. To plant a tree, to feed a calf, to clean a well — those are the works undoubtedly useful to others, and which every sincere person cannot help but prefer to those questionable pursuits which our world regards as the highest and noblest human vocation.

Being a prophet is a high and noble calling. But we know what those priests represent who consider themselves prophets only because it is profitable for them and because they have an opportunity to present themselves that way. A prophet is not someone who receives the education of a prophet, but who has inner conviction that he is a prophet, that he must be him and cannot not to be him. This conviction is rare and can only be proven by the sacrifices that the man makes in order to pursue his calling.

The same applies to true science and true art. Some Lully who quits his kitchen help work at his own risk so that he can devote himself to playing violin, by his sacrifices, proves his calling. But a student of a conservatory, or any other student whose only task is to study what he is taught, doesn't not even have an opportunity to attest his calling: he simply takes advantage of the position that seems to him advantageous.

Manual labor gives the sense of duty and satisfaction for everybody; mental work is an exclusive activity that can give the sense of duty and satisfaction only to those who have certain calling. The calling can be manifested and proven only when the scientist or the artist sacrifices his tranquility and his welfare to follow his vocation.

The man who carries on his duty of providing his own sustenance by the works of his own hands, and, regardless of that, by depriving himself of rest and sleep, finds a way to think and work productively in the area of mental activity, proves his calling that way. But he who frees himself from common to all people moral obligation and, under the pretext of his propensity for arts or sciences, arranges for himself the life of a parasite — will never produce anything but false science and false art.

The products of true science and true art are the results of human sacrifices, and not of pursuit of material benefits.

‘But what is going to happen to science and art?’ - How many times I've heard this question from the people who had nothing to do with neither arts nor sciences, who did not have a slightest idea of what sciences and arts are! It would seem that these people don't value anything more than the well-being of humanity, which, in their opinion, is in the development of what

they call sciences and arts.

But how did it happen that people appeared so insane that they deny the usefulness of sciences and arts? There are craftsmen, there are farmers. It doesn't come to anybody's mind to challenge their usefulness, as it won't occur to a workman to start proving the usefulness of his work. He produces; his product is needed and it is a benefit to others. It is used, and no one doubts its usefulness; especially nobody has to prove it.

The producers of the sciences and arts ought to be in the same conditions. Then why there are people going out of their way proving their usefulness?

The fact of the matter is that the true producers of sciences and arts do not claim their rights; they give away the works of their labor; these works turn out to be useful; they don't need to claim any rights nor do they need any proofs of their rights.

But the vast majority of those who call themselves scientists and artists know very well that what they produce is not worth of what they consume, and that's the only reason why they are - like the priests of all times - so forcefully trying to prove that their work is essential for the welfare of humanity.

True art and true science had always existed and will always exist, like all other forms of human activity, and it is impossible and useless to challenge or prove their necessity. The false role, which sciences and arts play in our society, comes from the fact that the so-called educated people, led by scientists and artists, constitute a privileged caste, like priests. And this caste has all the shortcomings of all castes. The problem with a caste is that it disgraces and humiliates the very principle in name of which it is born. Instead of true religion, false religion comes out. Instead of true science - false science. The same applies to art. The problem with a caste is that it overwhelms the masses, and, in addition, it deprives them of what was meant to be disseminated among them. And the main problem with a caste is the contradiction, however convenient it is for its members, of the principle that they profess and the way they act.

With the exception of those who defend the ridiculous principle of science for the sake of science and art - for art, the

proponents of civilization have to acclaim that science and art represent the greatest benefit to humanity. What this benefit consists of?

What are the signs by which one could distinguish the benefit, good from evil? Proponents of science and art meticulously shun answering these questions. They even claim that it is impossible to define good and beauty. "Good in general," they say, "good, beauty cannot be defined." But they are lying. At all times humanity in its gradual evolution did just that – clarified the definition of good and beauty. The good was defined many centuries ago. But these people do not like that definition. It reveals their worthlessness or even the harmful, contrary to good and beauty, consequences of what they call their sciences and their arts. Good and beauty were defined many centuries ago. Brahmins, wise Buddhists, Chinese, Jewish, Egyptian sages, Greek Stoics described them, and the Gospel gave them the precise definition.

Everything that connects people is good and beauty; all that separates them is evil and ugliness. Everyone is familiar with this formula. It is inscribed in our hearts.

Good and beauty for humanity is what connects people. So, if the supporters of sciences and arts really meant to benefit mankind, they would know what benefits human being; and having known this, they would deal with only those sciences and those arts that lead to this goal. There would be no legal science, military science, political economy, and financial science, because all these sciences have no other purpose than benefiting some peoples over others. If the criterion for sciences and arts was true well-being, then the discoveries of exact sciences that are inadequate for true well-being of humanity would have never gained the magnitude they have; and especially our works of arts, which are barely able to dispel the boredom of idle people, would have never acquired their prominence.

Human wisdom is not in the knowledge of things.

There are countless things that we cannot know. Wisdom is not to know as much as possible. Human wisdom is in knowing of the priority in which it is useful to know things; it is in the ability to allocate our knowledges

according to the degree of their importance.

Meanwhile, of all the sciences that man can and should know, the most important is the science of how to live life, doing as little evil as possible and as much good as possible; and of all the arts paramount is the art to be able to avoid evil, and to do good with the least amount of resources involved.

And it turns out that, among all the sciences and arts claiming to serve the good of humanity, the most important science and the most important art are not only omitted, but excluded from the list of sciences and arts.

What in our world is called sciences and arts is nothing but a massive "humbug", an enormous superstition in which we typically fall into as soon as we free ourselves from an old, church, superstition.

To clearly see the path which we must follow, it is necessary to start from the beginning, - to remove the hood that gives us warmth but closes our eyes.

The temptation is huge. We are getting born, and next, by work or rather with the help of some mental dexterity we gradually climb the steps and appear among the privileged, - the priests of civilization and culture; and for us to question the principles, to which we are obliged for our advantageous position, we must have — just as a Brahmin or Catholic priest need — the great sincerity and the great love for truth and good.

But to an earnest person like you, who raises the question of life, there is no choice. To gain a clear view on things, he must free himself from that superstition in which he lives, however profitable that superstition is to him. It's the condition 'sine qua non'.

It's useless to argue with a person who tenaciously holds onto a certain belief, even if only on a single point. If the man is not free from a prejudice, no matter how much he exerts his thinking, he won't make a step closer to the truth. His preconceived belief will obstruct and distort all his ratiocination.

Similarly to the religious belief, there is a belief in our civilization.

They are very much alike. A catholic tells: "I can reason, but only within the boundaries of what our scripture and tradition teach us, as they possess complete, immutable truth." A believer in civilization tells, "I won't rationalize beyond the data of civilization, science and art. Our science is a collection of true human knowledge. If it hasn't yet acquired the whole truth, it will. Our art, with its classic traditions, is the only true art." Catholics say: "Beside human being, there is one 'thing-in-itself', as the Germans say, that is the church." People of our world say: "There is one thing in itself beside human being, it is civilization." It is easily for us to spot the errors of judgement in religious superstitions because we do not share those superstitions. But a believer in any religion, such as Catholic, is convinced that there is only one true religion — precisely the one he confesses; it even seems to him that the truthfulness of his religion can be proven by reasoning. The same seems to us, the believers in civilization: as we are fully convinced that there is only one true civilization — which is precisely ours; and it is nearly impossible for us to perceive a logical flaw in the reasoning of those who strive to prove it's only our time and only those several million people who live on the peninsula called Europe, of all times and of all peoples, have true civilization, consisting of true sciences and true arts.

To perceive the truth of life, which is very simple, don't need to look for a positive principle in philosophy or deep science; one negative principle will suffice: to not have superstitions.

You need to bring yourself into the state of a child or of Descartes, and tell yourself: I know nothing, I trust nothing, and I want only one: to perceive the truth of the life which I must live. And the answer was already given centuries ago, and this answer is simple and clear.

My inner sense tells me that I require well-being, happiness for myself, for myself alone. My reason tells me: all people, all creatures want the same. All creatures, who search for personal happiness like I do, will crush me: I clearly cannot possess the happiness which I wish; yet it is in this pursuit of happiness that I see my whole life. Not to have the ability to obtain happiness, not to strive for it, means not to live. Does it mean therefore I

cannot live? The reasoning tells me that in such world conditions in which all beings strive toward only their own wellbeing, I, as a creature who wants to do the same, cannot achieve the wellbeing; I cannot live. And yet, despite such clear judgement, we do live, and we strive toward the happiness and wellbeing. We tell ourselves: 'Only then I could reach wellbeing and be happy if all other creatures would love me more than they love themselves.' This is impossible; yet, despite this, we all live.

All of our activity, our strive for wealth, fame, power, is nothing but an attempt to make others love us more than they love themselves.

Wealth, fame, power give us resemblance of such order of things; and we're almost satisfied, even at times we forget that this is only a semblance rather than reality. All beings love themselves more than they love us, and happiness is impossible. There are people (and their number is increasing from day to day), who, not being able to resolve this contradiction, shoot themselves, saying that life is only a deception.

However, the solution can't be easier, and it presents itself. Only then I can be happy when it would be possible for all beings in the world to love others more than they love themselves. The whole world would be happy if all beings would love not themselves, but loved others. I am a human being, and my reason opens to me this law of happiness of all beings. I have to follow the law of my reason - I should love others more than I love myself. Once a person will make this ratiocination, the life will appear to him in a different light than before. All beings exterminate each other; but at the same time, all creatures love each other and help each other. Life is supported not by extermination but by mutual sympathy of creatures, which is expressed in my heart by the feeling of love.

As soon as I began to understand the course of things in this world, I saw that it's only the initiation of mutual kindness that brings about human progress.

The whole history is nothing but the growing understanding and the application of this sole principle of solidarity among all beings. The reasoning therefore is confirmed by the course of history, as well as by personal

experience.

But even beside the ratiocination, a man finds the most convincing proof of the truthfulness of this reasoning in his inner feelings. The biggest happiness accessible to a person, his freest and happiest state, is the state of self-denial and love. Reason reveals to man the only possible way to reach happiness, and his senses urge him to this path.

If some thoughts I was trying to convey here will seem unclear to you, don't judge them too harshly. I hope that some other time you will read them in a clearer and more precise form.

I wanted to just give you an idea of my view on things.

Leo Tolstoy

1887